

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Veterinary Student Life During the Great Depression, Part I

Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of stories describing veterinary life during the Great Depression. They are based on personal interviews I started in 2007 with veterinarians who attended college during the 1930s. The full collection of stories, most of which include audio, can be found at *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy* (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/11807>). Though every attempt has been made to preserve the integrity of the interviewees' remarks, words are sometimes changed to make the comment clearer to the reader. The unabridged version can be read and/or heard by referring to the website above.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
November 17, 2013

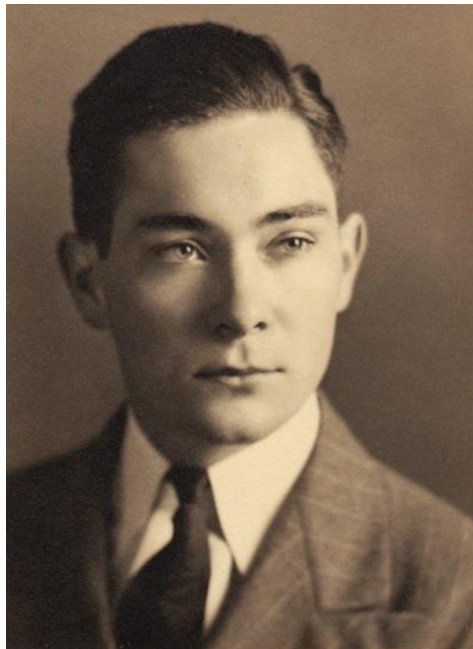


Andrew M. Draper, DVM 1938
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

There has not been passenger train service to the Finger Lakes area of New York for decades. However, at that time, virtually all the student transportation was by train, unless you had a car which very few people had in the middle thirties.¹

During their time in Ithaca, most first-year veterinary students rented Spartan rooms in houses owned by families who had a room or two to spare. There was insufficient dormitory space for male students, and even if there had been space available, there were few who could afford the luxury.

Upper class students often moved into one of the veterinary fraternities, usually Alpha Psi, to save money. Jewish students, for whom the regular fraternities were off limits, lived together in a house, often renting the entire structure and accommodating several students.² Women students were required to live in dormitories under close supervision.



John P. Ayres, DVM 1939
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Despite access to a so-called “free education” provided through the land grant system, students were still charged fees by the university, and had to pay for room, board, and books. John Ayres roomed with an upper class student in his first year.³

That helped me financially, but I was still short as my rent was about three dollars a week. In my third year, I got a rent-free room in the basement of the James Law Building. I cleaned stables on weekends and helped the regular employees care for the horses and cattle. I also maintained security and looked after the hospitalized animals at night, and did odd jobs for the faculty, like copying notes.

Christmas was probably the loneliest time for me because I never went home for the holidays, though it was only fifty miles away. Those who went home left their part time jobs and I would fill them. My pockets were empty at the beginning of the Christmas season, but when my classmates came back to resume school, my pockets were full.

It was not uncommon practice for students to take meat or poultry home from the necropsy (autopsy) room.⁴

If the post mortem room had a healthy horse with a broken leg that was going to be embalmed for student dissection, I'd put a bullet in it, skin it, and put it on hooks. But it didn't take me long to figure out that I could slice a few steaks from those horses and put them in the freezer. I would put my name on the package and the professors didn't remove it, thinking it was probably a specimen from the Diagnostic Lab.

John Ayres had a job milking cows and would often get permission to take a pail of milk home. He would also gather fallen apples from the Cornell orchard in the fall, sometimes making a meal of apples, milk, and bread.



Albert P. Pontick, DVM 1939
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

The local physician, Dr. Forrest Lee, took Albert Pontick under his wing and furnished him a room and a bath off the house.⁵

I helped Mrs. Lee maintain the house—serving dinners, washing dishes, doing the floors, vacuuming. It was a wonderful home and I was considered a member of the family. Having come from a very poor family, it was the first time in my life that I really had good meals—the first time I ever learned what lamb chops were, and things like that.

The following year, Pontick had a little business with a classmate, Alvin Rice, which they called simply, the “Food Shop.” They sold 50 to 60 sandwiches to the fraternities each evening.⁶

Married men with spouses who worked outside the home also struggled to make ends meet. While his wife served as a nurse at the local hospital, Mark Crandall worked in the cafeteria as a bus boy, cleaning tables. He studied Udall's medicine textbook⁷ downstairs in the dish room where he washed trays. He would put his book up on the table and read and work at the same time. He did that the entire four years of veterinary college, some weeks earning \$10.00, and some weeks earning more.⁸



Clifford H. Hoppenstedt, DVM 1935
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Clifford Hoppenstedt slept in an attic room rented for \$65 a quarter. He and his brother, an undergraduate student, worked at what he called *wealthy fraternities*, waiting tables and washing dishes for a free meal.⁹

Cornell always had the rich and the poor. Students in the veterinary college were classified as very poor financially because they came from a rural background and the farm income was low compared to the students in liberal arts or engineering.



Lawrence T. Waitz, DVM 1931
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Working night schedules, as some students did, made it difficult to stay alert the next day in class. Larry Waitz remembers the dean, Pierre Fish, giving a lecture in the amphitheater.¹⁰

All of a sudden, he stopped and said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Waitz, will you straighten Crandall's neck, he's going to have a stiff neck and I'm afraid he won't be able to get up after the lecture?" Mark was sleeping in the back row. He had worked all night somewhere; we mostly all did, you know.

Waitz spoke with near reverence about the brilliance of another classmate, Paul Marvin, who worked every night as a short-order cook in some little restaurant near campus. He described how Marvin would come home at 11:00 pm and look through his studies for about 15 minutes before going to sleep. "Paul hardly had any chance to study," Waitz said, "and he still did very well."

Though many of the men I interviewed talked of their love and respect for their families, none was more profoundly grateful than John Ayres. His mother had held the family and the farm together after his father's debilitating stroke that had occurred the summer before John matriculated at Cornell. He credited her encouragement for helping get him through difficult times. "I always remembered the things my mother told me, her little expressions like, '*God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb*,'" he said.¹¹

After Dr. Ayres graduated with his DVM, he went home and gave his mother \$300 that he had saved from his 40-, 45- and 50-cents-per-hour jobs.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Poultry Veterinarian. A Biography of and Interview with Tevis M. Goldhaft, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, September 26, 2007. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/22013>

² Smith, Donald F. Quintessentially Cornell. A Biography of and Interview with John D. Murray, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, December 3, 2007; and subsequent personal communications by telephone and in person at Cornell University or Penn Yan, NY, March –December, 2008.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12302>

³ Smith, Donald F. A Grateful Heart and a Penchant for Justice. A Biography of and Interview with John P. Ayres, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, December 11, 2007.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12871>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Smith, Donald F. Long Island Entrepreneur. A Biography of and Interview with Albert P. Pontick, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, April 2, 2008. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12794>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Udall, D. H. The Practice of Veterinary Medicine, Published by the author, Ithaca, NY, 1933.

⁸ Smith, Donald F. The Best Speech I Ever Made. A Biography of and Interview with Mark R. Crandall, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, May 28, 2008. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/13350>

⁹ Smith, Donald F. Ivy League Brothers. A Biography of and Interview with Clifford H. Hoppenstedt, DVM and Gilbert F. Hoppenstedt, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, February 9, 2009.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/13386>

¹⁰ Smith, Donald F. The Depression's Veterinary Legend. A Biography of and Interview with Lawrence T. Waitz, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, October 9, 2007.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12879>

¹¹ Interview with John P. Ayres, see endnote 4, above.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
The Great Depression
Cornell University
Andrew Malcolm Draper
Tevis M. Goldhaft
Mark R. Crandall
John P. Ayres
Albert P. Pontick
Lawrence T. Waitz
Clifford H. Hoppenstedt
Gilbert F. Hoppenstedt
John D. Murray
Oral history

TOPIC:

The Great Depression

LEADING QUESTION:

How did veterinary students pay for college during the Depression?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.